

## **Summarized Interview with Phyllis Walker-Ford**

**Conducted by Nia King and Solenne Montgomery on March 15, 2021  
for the West Springfield High School Applied History Program**

Mrs. Phyllis Walker-Ford, 73, was interviewed by Nia King and Solenne Montgomery on March 15th, 2021. Phyllis Walker-Ford, then Phyllis Walker, was born March 29th, 1947, in Washington, D.C. Although her family was from and lived in the Franconia community in Fairfax County, her mother gave birth to her in Washington, D.C since that was the only hospital that allowed black patients. Mrs. Phyllis first began by explaining how she was raised. Her parents, while single and living apart, pooled their money to build a home in 1941-42. They were married in the living room of that new home in August 1942. The home was built on the land her dad's family bought. She mentioned her neighborhood was drastically different from Northern Virginia today, with it being mainly rural farm areas with vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and even farm animals like horses, cows, and sometimes hogs. Her father was born and raised in Franconia, Virginia, and her mother was born and raised in Markham, Virginia. She had an older brother, Dumont Walker, Jr. Her mother had a nursing certificate but didn't work, and her father supervised a burial team at Arlington National Cemetery. The makeup of the community was predominantly white, however since she did live on the land her dad's family bought, she lived very close to her relatives and extended family. Her family was Baptist and attended church at the Laurel Grove Baptist Church, which burned down in December 2004, which Phyllis noted was a historical event in her life. The church was built in 1884. Recreational activities in her neighborhood included baseball and basketball, with her house being the central hub for basketball since she had a basketball hoop. Due to the close proximity to her relatives, holidays were spent together when she was young and they were hosted between the different houses of her dad and his siblings. This holiday tradition lasted until the houses of the family were sold.

For elementary school, she attended Drew-Smith Elementary in Gum Springs, Virginia which was a segregated school with an all-black staff and had grades kindergarten through seventh grade. The school was built in 1951 and was named after Dr. Charles Drew and Mrs. Annie Smith. Dr. Drew was an African American doctor and medical researcher whose work in blood transfusion helped develop large blood banks during World War 2, and who advocated against racial segregation in the medical field, specifically in regards to donating blood. Mrs. Annie Smith was the wife of the grandson of Gum Springs' founder, and was the first black teacher of the Gum Springs school in the 19th century. Since it was segregated, a lot of the students had to commute to Lorton, Spring Bank, Franconia, and Hayfield.

For high school, she attended and graduated from Luther Jackson High School in 1965. Named after the historian and educator Dr. Luther P. Jackson , whose work was recognized by the NAACP and credited African Americans as a major part of Virginia history, Luther Jackson High School was the first all-black high school in Fairfax County. It had an all-black administration and faculty, and most students who attended had to make a long commute since black students from all over Fairfax County attended. Phyllis mentioned that though her high school was segregated, she still felt the encouragement from the teachers and how devoted they were to the students. The sense of community at Luther Jackson was strong and made her appreciate the school and the teachers for what it was: a very nurturing place. For Drew Smith as well, the teachers emphasized the importance of learning. Throughout her schooling, although she attended segregated schools, Phyllis said she never felt she was falling behind in comparison to her white peers.

For college, she initially went to St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia where three of her dad's sisters went. When asked about what she wanted to major in she mentioned that all she knew was that she didn't want to be a teacher like her aunts, but was interested in the medical technician field. She also mentioned that she knew she didn't want to stay long term at St Paul's, so she transferred to her older brother's college, Bluefield State College, located in Bluefield, West Virginia.

Bluefield State College, although it was considered a historically black college, had a mixture of students back then with most being black. She wasn't sure what she wanted to major in so decided on business administration. She graduated with a degree in business administration. Although her family didn't discuss the social climate at the time or politics, she remembers that throughout college she participated in some sit-ins in the administration building, mainly in her senior year in 1968 and 1969. Her college was small so there was not much protesting on campus, and if there was, it was a handful of sit-ins and protests for educational equity and civil rights. She recalls coming home from college one time after the death of MLK, and the train not stopping in Washington, D.C because of the riots that were occurring, so everyone who was supposed to get off in Washington, D.C was dropped off in Alexandria, Virginia and had to somehow find a way home.

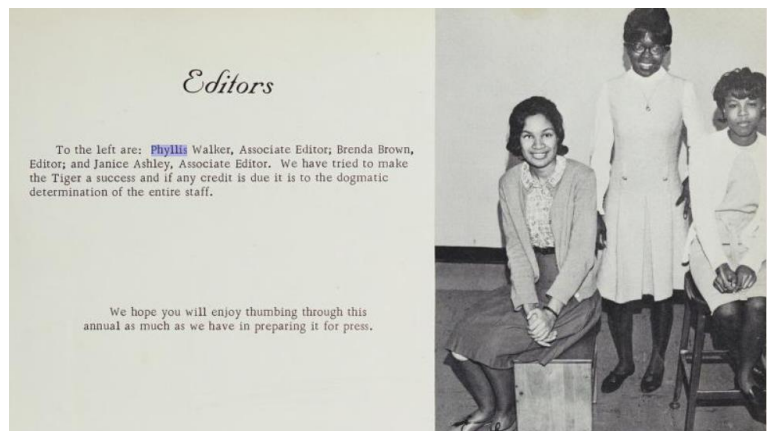
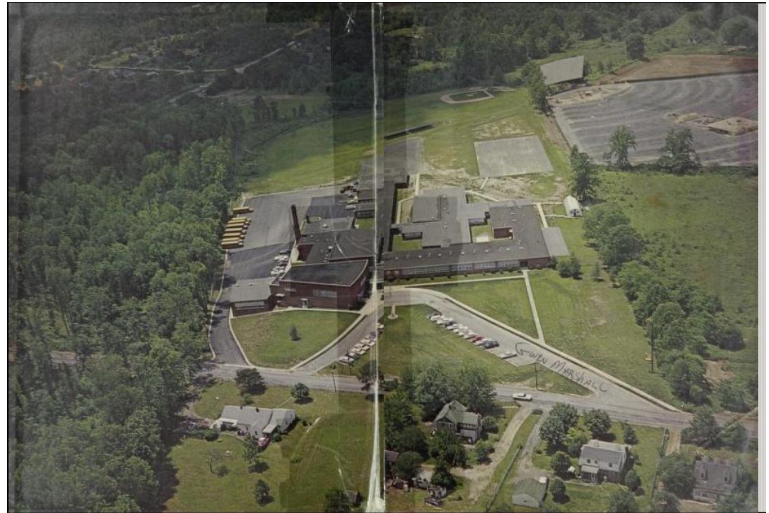
After graduating and getting her degree in business administration, she married Clifton Ford, a Bluefield graduate who was an active-duty U.S. Navy member. She moved to Boston because that is where he was stationed, and then after a while moved to Mayport, Florida just outside of Jacksonville, Florida. She remembers when she and her husband first moved to Mayport going to look at apartments because they wanted to live in the city but ending up back at the military base in Mayport because the apartment they found didn't come with any appliances. When they asked the person showing them the apartment why, they said because "you people", referring to black people, didn't know how to keep up and take care of those things. Phyllis admitted that she experienced more racism in the workforce than in school. In her experience, she felt like only so many black people would be allowed to be promoted. She even said that at one of her jobs, the black employees would get together outside of work because they felt isolated when they were working and to discuss everyone's progress. Eventually, they moved back to the metropolitan area and got an apartment in Washington, D.C. In 1974, she and her husband moved back to Virginia into a house her aunt had built. However, because of the locations of their respective jobs, they decided to move to Maryland in 1977 and buy a house for an easier commute since she worked in Maryland and her husband worked in Washington, D.C. Their son Matthew was

born in their home in Silver Spring in 1981. They lived in their house in Silver Spring, MD for about 20 years before moving back to Fairfax County in 1999 to become care manager for her aunts. Two aunts lived with her and her husband then the 3rd stayed at a nursing home. She said that if her aunts were to pass, she and her husband would move back to Maryland but she and her husband ended up staying in Fairfax County. She explained that after she moved back, she noted how there still seemed to be some difficulties in navigating county oversight. She realized at the time the county had a “master plan” on how the county was going to be developed and felt it sometimes affected African Americans more than any other race. The County with its Master Plan could determine how land should be developed, for example, finding land to build an office park, school, etc. All-in-all she noted how equity was still an issue in 1999. However, she noted today the issue has improved because of the increase of elected public servants in office.

Around the same time, the Walker Family decided as a group to sell 23 acres of land, 13 acres of which had been purchased by her great grandfather. When asked what sparked her interest in local history, Phyllis said it began with the Laurel Grove Schoolhouse project, now a museum. The sale of the property revealed that one of the buildings had been a one-room school for “colored children”. The developers thought the schoolhouse could be restored and used to tell local history. The project began in 2002 and lasted until 2004. The developers, Mark and Barbara Fried provided resources to research and document the Laurel Grove history. Here is some of the history uncovered: The schoolhouse had one room and was built to provide local black children in the Franconia area with an education. Phyllis’s dad and his siblings attended the school. She said her dad was sick as a kid and had a heart condition, so he didn’t continue his education past Laurel Grove. However, his three sisters and brother furthered their education and went to school in DC since there were no public schools for black kids in Fairfax County at the time. His siblings had to take a train to DC to further their education beyond seventh grade. They had to register and lie about living in D.C to attend school in D.C. The schoolhouse shut down around 1932 due to small class size and became the property of Fairfax County.

In 1955, Phyllis said that the property was put up for auction and her aunt, Alma Bushrod and her husband Thurman were the successful bidders, and thus the property made it back into the family. The restoration of the building included refurbishing, outsourcing, and researching local history. Phyllis said they took out the drywall and discovered the original slatted walls. For furniture, they had to find original pieces and more authentic pieces for the period. She even mentioned how a curator from the Smithsonian came to help figure what authentic pieces to have. Phyllis and the team even managed to find former students who attended the school to help give insight on restoration. After working on the schoolhouse project, she was asked to be on Fairfax County History Commission, which is charged with preserving history around Fairfax County. Phyllis said it is important to know your family history, the successes, hardships, struggles are all examples that will help you in life. “If you know what has happened in your past it will prepare you for the future”. To this day, the Laurel Grove Schoolhouse project is still something Phyllis works on and is a part of.

To wrap up, Phyllis has one son, Matthew, his wife Jewell, and three granddaughters. When asked what advice she would give her son, his wife, and granddaughters she said know your family history, make God the center of your life, you will always succeed.



*Top left:* Yearbook photo of Mrs. Phyllis in 1965, her graduating year in highschool.

*Top right:* Aerial picture of Luther Jackson Highschool in 1965. Luther Jackson Highschool closed in June of 1965 due to integration of public and busing of black students to formerly all-white schools. From there on after, Luther Jackson Highschool became an intermediate school, now known today as Luther Jackson Middle School.

*Bottom left:* Mrs. Phyllis pictured and named Miss Homemaker of Luther Jackson 1965 after scoring high on the written homemaking exam.

*Bottom Right:* In her senior year, Mrs. Phyllis was associate editor of *The Jackson Tattler*, the annual newspaper at Luther Jackson High School.

In the foreground is Laurel Grove Baptist church, and in the background is Laurel Grove Colored School building, photo taken approximately in the mid 20th century.



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